

CHAPTER 2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

PROPOSED PROJECT

The proposed project involves the release of wild turkeys at one to six sites in northern California (see Project Locations) to enhance turkey populations and increase wild turkey hunting opportunities primarily on public lands open to hunting (see Project Need). Approximately 50 turkeys in a ratio of about three females to one male will be released at each of the proposed sites. Releases will occur from late-fall to early-spring, with the goal of stocking all sites within the first year following approval of the project. Any sites that are not stocked that first year, will be stocked the following year. The Merriam's subspecies of wild turkey (*M. g. merriami*) are proposed for release at all of the proposed sites (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of subspecies). All source stock will come from out-of-state wild populations that are considered disease free (see Disease Testing).

Site Selection

The proposed project is a conservative alternative to a more aggressive program including release sites statewide (see Chapter 5). The six sites in the proposed project were selected to provide additional hunting opportunities while proceeding cautiously in response to concerns regarding potential impacts of turkeys to the environment. Turkeys have been previously released and may currently exist in each of these areas, but their populations are not considered established. These sites contain a large percentage of public lands open to hunting, while best avoiding public and private lands where turkeys are not desired. Turkeys will be monitored post-release to gather additional information regarding wild turkey ecology in California, before determining whether to expand turkeys at more sites statewide, particularly in those areas where they do not currently exist.

Post-Release Monitoring

The Department and affiliated academic institutions will monitor a sample of at least 25 radio-marked birds at each of the proposed release sites, with an emphasis on females, for up to two years following release. The objectives of post release monitoring will be to determine movements, survival, and productivity of the released birds at each of the release sites. Additional information regarding habitat use and food habits will also be collected to improve knowledge regarding turkey ecology in California environments.

Disease Testing

Wild turkeys captured for translocation will be tested for avian diseases of concern in wild turkeys and domestic poultry. Prior to release, the risk of transmission of infectious disease from captured turkeys will be evaluated according to Department disease testing protocols by a Department or other qualified veterinarian. Captured wild turkeys will only be released if they are judged to be of no significant disease risk to other wild or domestic fowl. Birds that may be diseased will be euthanized at the discretion of the aforementioned veterinarian (see Appendix C for a detailed description of the Department's wild turkey disease testing protocol).

Coordination with Land Management Agencies

All of the proposed release sites are primarily intended to populate public lands where hunting recreation is a management goal. Lands managed by the USFS constitute the majority of public lands in the project areas. Each of the proposed release sites has been mutually agreed upon by the Department and the USFS, both at the local National Forest level and statewide with the Pacific Southwest Regional

Forester's Office. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Field offices were also consulted and agreed to the release of turkeys on their lands.

The USFS expressed concerns about wild turkeys becoming established in designated wilderness areas because they are not indigenous to those areas, and are thereby inconsistent with the management policies of those areas. The Department and USFS, Pacific Southwest Region, have mutually agreed that turkeys should not be released in or near a designated wilderness area.

State and National Parks expressed concerns about turkeys becoming established on their lands because of conflicts with land management policies in parks or wilderness areas. To avoid conflicts with the aforementioned land management agencies, the Department selected the proposed release sites to prevent turkeys from becoming established in those areas. If turkeys do become established in these areas as a result of the proposed project, the Department will take appropriate actions to cooperate in removing or eliminating them when requested by the land management agency.

Project Changes

The proposed project involves the release of wild turkeys at six sites for population enhancement. Seven sites were originally proposed for release in the Notice of Preparation, but the Trinity site was dropped to avoid potential impacts to the environment. Additionally, a portion of the project proposed in the NOP discussed relocation of resident turkeys to Department Wildlife Areas to resolve conflicts with turkeys occupying urban and agricultural areas where they are not desired, which was dropped in favor of being addressed in a larger statewide management plan for existing populations.

The project proposed in this DEIR may be further changed to include only portions of the proposed project in the final EIR, including selected release sites from those proposed. Each release site is analyzed separately in this document for potential impacts to the environment to facilitate selection of individual release sites as the final project.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

Project Need

Interest in wild turkey hunting is increasing rapidly in California. Recent information collected by the Department indicates that more than 50% of the public that purchases a hunting license has interest in wild turkey hunting. Current wild turkey populations are found primarily on private lands in California, thereby providing limited hunting opportunity for the public. Additional suitable habitat for wild turkeys may be available on public lands throughout the state that are open to hunting. These areas are higher elevation habitats in which current populations are unlikely to expand and become established, therefore requiring active translocation to establish turkey populations. Turkey densities are not expected to exceed five birds per square mile in occupied areas, which is a high estimate for Merriam's turkey in their native range. See Chapter 3 for a discussion of wild turkey range, habitat requirements, and subspecies established in the state.

Statutes and Policies

The proposed project, designed to expand turkey populations in an effort to expand turkey hunting opportunities is consistent with guiding statutes and policies of the state, including Fish and Game Code Section 1801 and Fish and Game Commission (Commission) policy regarding Department management of upland game

birds, including wild turkeys (Fish and Game Code Section 3500). Besides the aforementioned policies to provide hunting opportunities for wild turkeys, the Department also has numerous policies guiding protection of native biological resources. Because turkeys are not native to California, concerns have been raised in recent years regarding potential impacts of turkeys to the environment. Therefore, projects to expand turkey populations to provide additional hunting opportunity would be considered appropriate provided they do not impact the environment, especially native biological resources also under public trust by the Department.

To date, turkeys have not been demonstrated to cause such impacts, but a complete understanding of the ecological relationships of turkeys with native California flora and fauna may require additional information. Therefore, the Department selected the proposed project as a conservative approach to a more aggressive approach to provide expanded hunting opportunities statewide (See Chapter 5: Analysis of Alternatives to the Proposed Project, Figure 5.1). The collection of information from post release monitoring is intended to help develop adaptive management strategies to balance implementation of the aforementioned policies with risk of potential impacts to the environment.

PROJECT LOCATIONS

Six sites were identified for wild turkey range expansion and are analyzed in this document, including sites in El Dorado, Plumas, Sierra, Lassen, Mendocino, and Shasta Counties (Fig 2.1). The attached maps illustrate the approximate locations of the proposed release sites. The actual location will depend on access to the area during the winter months. If the site cannot be reached, birds will be released at the nearest possible suitable location not more than 5 miles from the specified site. All of the proposed release sites are on public lands. Turkeys have previously been released in each of these locations (see below).

El Dorado County

The release site in El Dorado County is located at Pea Vine Ridge (T. 24 N., R.10 E., Section 5), in the Eldorado National Forest (Fig. 2.2). Twenty-seven Merriam's turkeys were released at this site on January 8, 1999. The success of that release is unclear and Merriam's turkeys are not considered well established in this area. Resident populations of Rio Grande turkeys are well established at lower elevations in the county. This release is intended to enhance turkey populations that are not well established in higher elevations of the Eldorado National Forest, with Merriam's turkeys.

Sierra County

The release site in Sierra County is located at the Antelope Valley Wildlife Area (T. 21 N., R. 15 E., Section 34; Fig. 2.3). Twenty-seven Merriam's turkeys were released at this site on January 8, 1999. Turkeys have been seen in the area several times since then, including hens with poults demonstrating successful reproduction. However, the population is still not considered well established. This release is intended to enhance turkey populations that are not well established in higher elevations of the wildlife area and surrounding Tahoe National Forest.

Plumas County

The release site in Plumas County is located at Grizzly Ridge (T24N, R10E, Section 5), in the Plumas National Forest (Fig. 2.4). Twenty-seven Merriam's turkeys were released at this site on January 8, 1999. Turkeys have been sighted in the area since then, including hens with poults, demonstrating successful reproduction from the released population. This release is intended to enhance turkey populations that are not well established in the higher elevations of the Plumas National Forest.

Lassen County

The release site in Lassen County is located near Cady Springs at T. 30 N., R. 11 E., Section 35, on BLM lands (Fig. 2.5). Fifty-eight Merriam's turkeys were released on nearby lands owned by Sierra Pacific on January 22, 1999. Turkeys have been sited in the area several times since then and they have successfully reproduced. This release is intended to enhance turkey populations that are not well established in the higher elevations of the Lassen National Forest.

Shasta County

The release site in Shasta County is located along the Pit River at T. 36 N., R. 4 E., Section 9, on BLM (Fig. 2.6). Turkeys are known to exist in the release area. This release is intended to enhance local populations primarily in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest.

Mendocino County

The release site in Mendocino County is located near Tar Flat at T. 20 N., R. 9 W., Section 17, in the Mendocino National Forest (Fig. 2.7). Rio Grande turkeys are well established in the lower elevations of Mendocino County. Merriam's turkeys have been released in the higher elevations of the county, but are not considered well established. This release is intended to enhance turkey populations in higher elevation habitats of the Mendocino National Forest.